

“The Building Blocks of Faith: God”
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Today we embark on a journey together, winding our way through some of the major central points of belief in the Christian faith. This journey doesn't necessarily have a destination; when this sermon series is over, I hope the conversations will just be starting. My goal in this series, “The Building Blocks of Faith,” is to share with you the different tools you have available to help you articulate your beliefs on God, Jesus, communion, and so on. Those tools include what scripture says, the tradition that's been passed down through the centuries, the use of common sense reasoning, and the lessons we've learned from our experiences. I will also be sharing with you now and then what I believe personally in these areas, and how I came to them. I don't do this to say that this is how you should believe, but to give you one example of how belief is formed and how it changes over time.

I figured we better start slowly, so in the next 15 minutes I'll be explaining God. I may only need 10, but we'll see. This may be the hardest sermon I've had to write so far. It's far simpler to deal with particular aspect of God – mercy, forgiveness, justice. To try and sum up the nature of God in a sermon is like surfing in your bathtub. Your resources are severely limited and you won't get far.

So it's important that we all acknowledge together right up front that, in essence, we are not going to accomplish this morning what we are setting out to do. We are attempting the impossible – to use our finite understanding to explain an infinite God. God is never reducible to our description of God. God is and always will be bigger than the vocabulary we have to explain God. And yet, our vocabulary is all we have, so that's what we use.

Because God is so big and mysterious and beyond our understanding, we humans do our best to simplify God to help us grasp the concept. We make God into a someone, because that's the best way we can understand God. Most of us learned about God when we were children. What was your image of God growing up? I'll bet it was the same as mine: The old man with the flowing white beard. We were taught, either in church or by our family, that God was this nice old man who lived up in Heaven. God knew everything and everyone, and God had the power to do anything.

Gary Larson captures this child-like understanding of God in one of his “Far Side” cartoons. On a game show set, there are two contestants: God and Norman. God, with his flowing beard and robe of light, has 16 thousand points; Norman, with his glasses and crewcut, has 0. In the caption, the announcers says, “Yes, that's right, God! The answer is Wisconsin! Another 50 points for God, and...uh-oh, looks like Norman, our current champion, hasn't even scored yet.” That's the God I grew up believing in: an all-powerful, all-knowing God who watches us from God's throne in Heaven.

That image is a comforting one, because it gives us the belief that someone bigger than us is in control. I think it also gives us the illusion of protection: if you believe in God and be a good person, nothing bad will ever happen. But we quickly learn that that simply isn't the case. Everybody endures trials in their lives, everybody goes through valleys, and these times cause us to revisit our understanding of God. If God is all-powerful, why did God let this happen? If God is all-knowing, why didn't God prepare

me for this? Our belief about who God is and how God works necessarily evolves as we are forced to ask such questions.

One of the ways our belief in God is shaped is through scripture, but this can present a problem. The Bible characterizes God in hundreds of different ways, from a wrathful God to a protective fortress to a mother hen. How do we figure out who God is for us? Do we believe Isaiah, who says, “By the wrath of the Lord Almighty the land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire,” or do we believe John, who simply tells us, “God is love”? When the Bible says two different things, how do we know what to believe?

Two ways. First, because we confess believe in God specifically revealed through Jesus Christ, our understanding of God must be a Christian understanding, and our image of God must be in concert with our Christian values. Does a God who seeks vengeance fit our Christian understanding? Does a God who causes bad things to happen in people’s lives fit our Christian understanding? Our Christianity serves as a corrective to our image of God.

Second, when we are faced with two competing views, a powerful question to ask is, “What has been your experience of God?” In your life, in the times when you’ve felt God’s presence, how would you characterize God? Sometimes at funerals I hear, especially for younger people, “Well, this was God’s will.” Was it? I have trouble believing in a God who would want us to die, who would create us and give us life only to capriciously snatch it away. That’s not my God. I’ve never experienced God as someone who gave me a disease or was the source of the bad things in my life. My experience of God has been primarily through the loving relationships in my life.

Because of this, I also have changed my understanding of God’s power. That process took me back to the very beginning in Genesis, when God created us. God made the decision to give humanity free will. We weren’t going to be some kind of divinely controlled robots; we were given the power to choose, include the power to choose whether or not to believe in God. I believe in a God who does not go back on his promises, so if we are promised free will, then God will always honor that promise.

But here’s the dilemma: by giving us free will, God chose to share God’s power with us. God was no longer all-powerful, in the traditional sense. If a person chose to pull a trigger, God gave up power to miraculously stop the bullet. God gave us the power to make our own decisions, and to bear the responsibility of those decisions.

This is a dicey issue for me, because I don’t feel comfortable playing games with God’s power. This may just be theological pontification from the pulpit, but it has real-life consequences for us. I don’t believe God’s power in the universe and in our lives has diminished at all; but I do believe the nature of that power has changed. God doesn’t work through coercive, controlling power; what scripture tells me, and what my experience tells me, is that God works through relational power, a power that draws its strength from the greatest source: love. Disciples pastor Scott Colglazier says, “God uses friendship power, not controlling power. God uses the power of love, not the power of violence. God uses the power of invitation, not the power of coercion.”

This bears out in the New Testament. In the first century, people expected God to triumph over evil forces through the sheer force of God’s power and majesty. God would ride in on a fiery stallion and wipe out the Roman Empire and restore God’s people. And yet, here came this guy on a donkey, this guy who was beaten and spat upon, this guy

who was strung up on the cross like a criminal. Jesus conquered more than the Roman Empire; he conquered sin and death, and he did it through the power of love, not the power of force.

In my life, God's love for me has helped me overcome many obstacles. God hasn't intervened and cured me or saved a loved one from death, but God has sat beside me as I lay in a hospital bed and walked beside me as I carried a casket. And the most powerful way God has been present to me in my life is through my relationships with others: my family, my friends, my church. My God is a God of relationships, who uses the love of those around me to transform my life and give me hope.

The fact that God is most known to us through our relationships is a natural result of God's sharing power with us. Not only did God choose to share power, but also responsibility. God has shared the responsibility of caring for God's creation. Psalm 8 says, "You made us ruler over the works of your hand." If God exercised controlling power, would God need us to help care for creation? If God exercised coercive power, would God need us to take care of each other? God shared his power with us, and his responsibility with us.

In this sharing, a relationship of mutuality is formed. We are partners with God, partners in the covenant. And God depends on us to help bring about God's purposes in this world. If someone is in need, it is our responsibility to help them. If someone is grieving, it is our responsibility to comfort them. We honor our covenant with God by serving each other, by witnessing to them about God's work in the world.

We witness to a God powerful enough to create us, yet vulnerable enough to be moved by us and suffer with us. We witness to a God who is open to being challenged by Abraham and being changed by Moses. We witness to a God who gives us freedom of choice, and leads by the example of freely choosing to be in community with us, to work through our sin and error to love and empower others. And it is in the loving and empowering of others through us that God is most powerful.

Now, all that being said, I may have this all wrong; remember, God is never reducible to our description of God. So now it's in your hands. What does scripture tell you about the nature of God revealed through Jesus Christ? What do your experiences tell you about how God works in your life? Who is God for you? For me, John got it right. Plain and simple. God is love.